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PENCIL SKETCHING
FROM NATURE

BY JAMES PARTON HANEY

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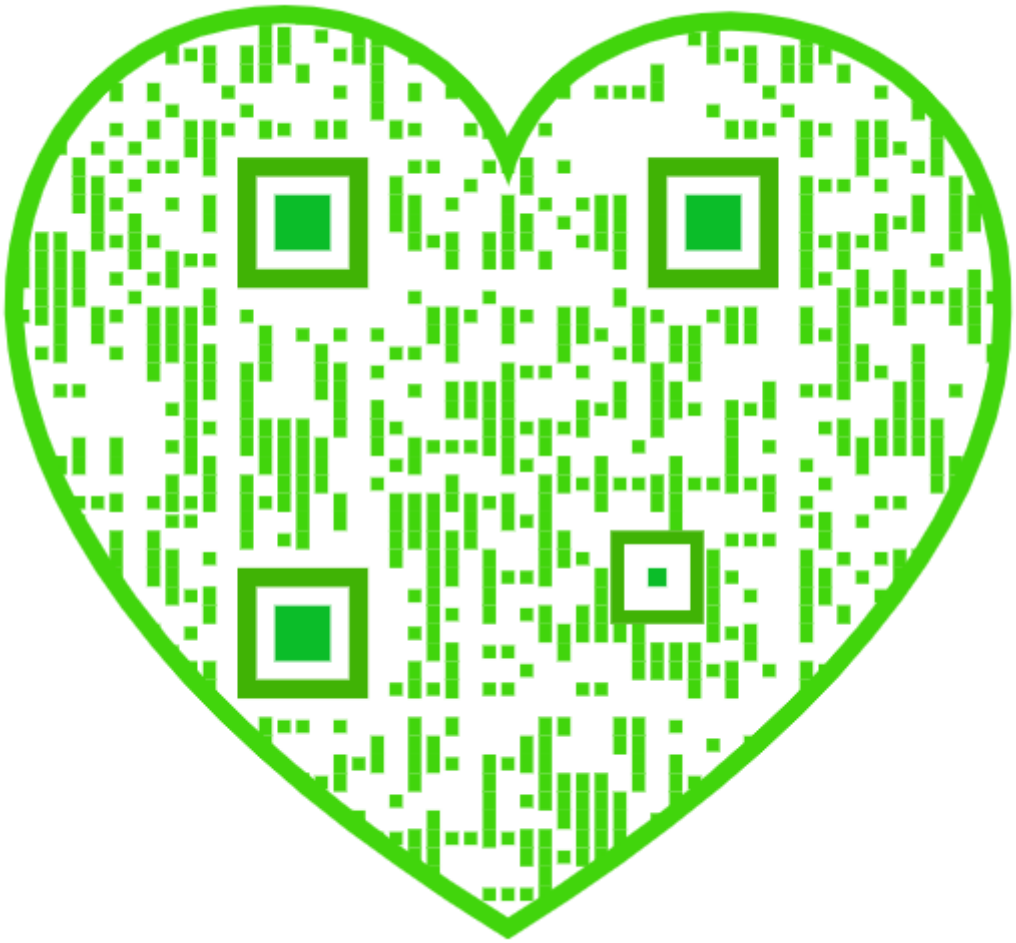

Pencil Sketching from Nature

By James Parton Haney

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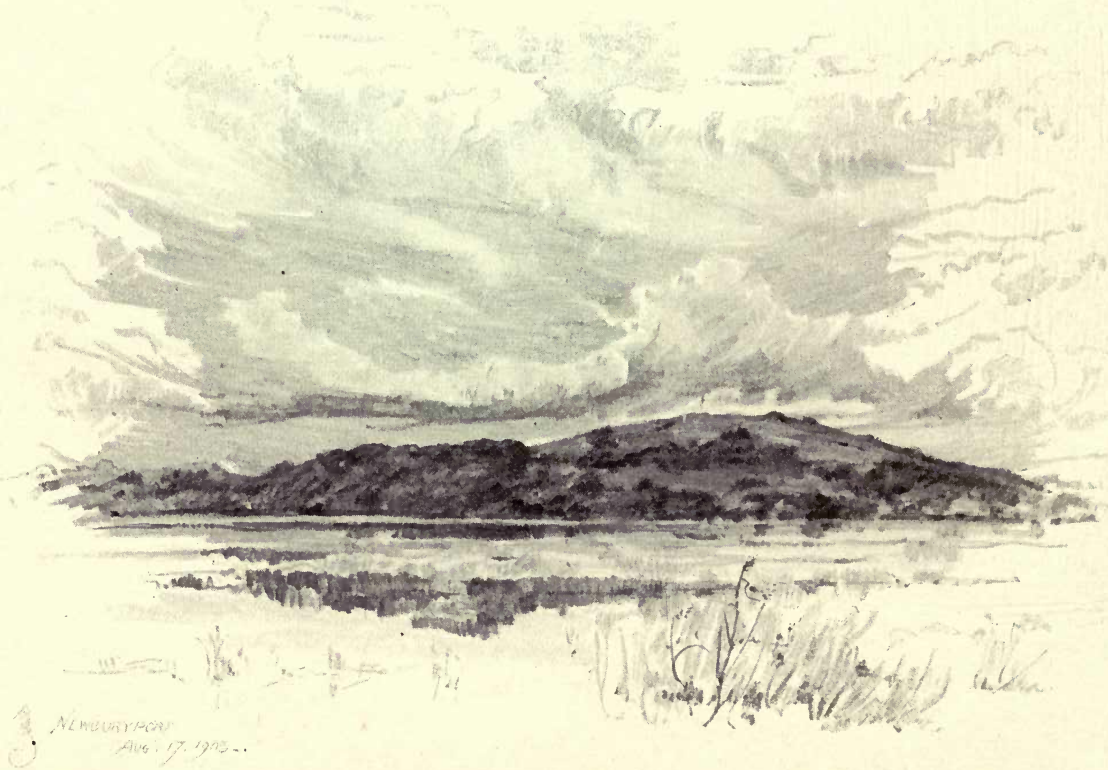
The pencil is indeed a very precious instrument after you are master of the pen and the brush, for the pencil, cunningly used, is both, and will draw a line with the precision of the one, and the gradation of the other.

RUSKIN.



The Clouds over the Meadows.

Pencil Sketching from Nature.

MANY assume that to sketch successfully in pencil one need only know how to draw. This is an error. Pencil is a medium and like other mediums—charcoal, water color or paint—has a technique which must be learned before happy expression is possible.

To give some hints as to this technique is the purpose of this pamphlet. It takes for granted that one who would sketch from nature has already mastered the elementary principles of drawing—proportion, foreshortening, perspective—and can successfully translate the relations of three dimensioned space to the flat page of a drawing book.

Upon the knowledge of these principles will depend what may be called, the structural excellence of every sketch. No success in pencil work may be hoped for, until the draughtsman is able to map out with a few light touches the main outlines of his picture and then boldly to draw in the great masses, correct in their proportions and so completely presented that no re-drawing is necessary. The timid and hesitant hand makes a timid and uncertain sketch with woolly lines and scumbled surfaces in place of crisp strokes and even tones made up of lines as broad as brush marks.

A few words may be devoted to pencils and paper. The best of pencils should be secured. The writer prefers the Kohinoor pencil made in Austria, but purchasable in every large city. The practiced hand will use at least five different grades (a 3B, an HB, an H, an F

and a 5H.) For the beginner, the HB, F, and 5H will suffice, the first for the dark shadows and accents and the last for the broad "washes" of tint. The full length pencil should be cut in half and sharpened to a blunt point well supported by wood and chiseled off at the end so that lines of all widths, from hair-like strokes to broad brush-like marks may be made with the protruding lead (See Figure 1).

For sketching purposes a good drawing paper with a slight grain is best. A smooth paper is unsatisfactory, while one of coarse tooth will render delicate effects impossible. For practice work any cheap paper will answer: but when one goes to work in the field, one

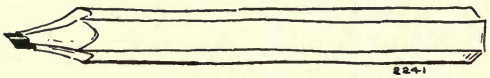


Fig. 1.

should have the best procurable. For convenience a small smooth covered port-folio is recommended, say one 12 x 15 inches. This will serve to hold the paper cut to a convenient size and will offer a good surface on which to draw. One or two spare sheets should be placed beneath the sheet drawn upon, that its surface may be made more resilient, while a broad elastic band stretched about the portfolio will serve to hold down the extreme upper edge of the sheets which may be slid beneath it.

That the student may learn control of his medium, he is urged to devote some time to preliminary practice in making smooth and forceful lines and building up masses by strokes so close together that the penciled surface when completed shows a tone as even as a wash of water color. This trick cannot be learned in an hour or a day, but the learner must persevere, holding his

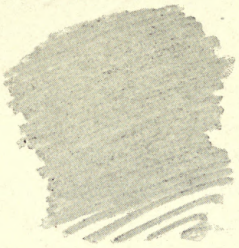


Fig. 2. Even pressure

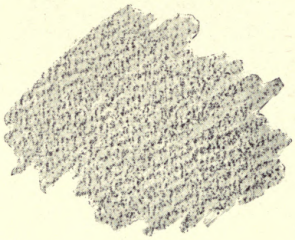


Fig. 3 Too light pressure.

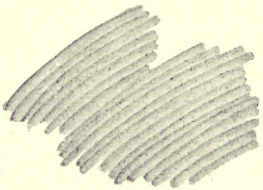
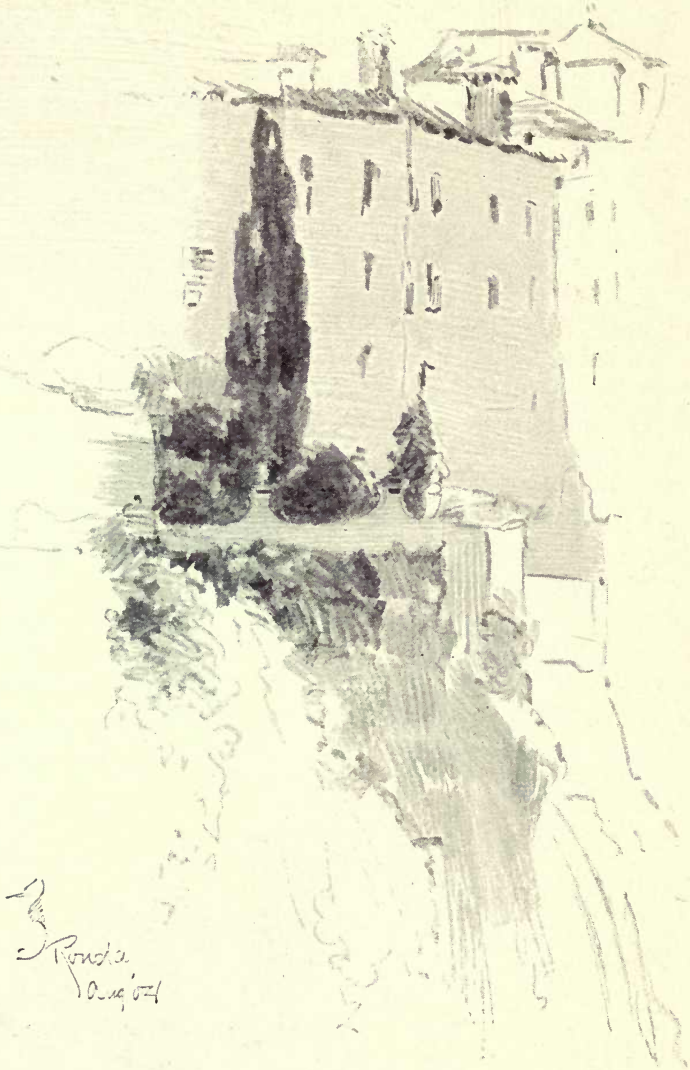


Fig. 4 Uneven pressure

pencil with the unsharpened end in the palm of the hand and gripped close to the end by thumb and middle finger, while the forefinger bears down so heavily that the lead in its stroke "irons" out the paper and leaves a smooth and even line. (See Figure 2). Work of this kind will be found not a little fatiguing when it is first undertaken, half an hour's continuous drawing, leaving the fingers numb from pressure. Such practice however is to be insisted upon. It leads to a virile, forceful line, one which distinguishes the adept from the apprentice hand. Figure 3 shows the woolly surface left by too light pressure, and Figure 4 the "liny" uneven tint due to a failure to keep the whole "face" of the lead firmly pressed upon the paper.

After practice has given facility, the student will find it of advantage to copy some good example of pencil drawing, choosing at first some simple detail and rendering this over and over again until the freshness and directness of the original re-appear in the copy. Especially should this effort be directed toward rendering of masses of foliage, bits of brick work, etc. which so often puzzle the beginner when he is called upon to reproduce them in the field. Excellent examples of this nature can be found in magazines like The Studio, where the pencil sketches of men like E. Borough Johnson, Tony Grubhofer, Charles Cottel, Frank Emanuel and a host of others, are reproduced with striking fidelity.

From a study of these the student will be led to see that the successful sketch largely depends upon the development of satisfactory contrasts of light and dark. Natural contrasts are emphasized and others are created at will by the draughtsman, who seeks rather to suggest the planes of his drawing than to represent them in their true values. Indeed the latter were impossible.


Ronda
Aug '74

Pencil sketching is suggestive and not photographic. Subtleties must perforce be ignored and contrasts often forced, that simplicity may be secured while the illusion of solidity is created. As the student has but few tones of black at his command, he cannot hope to reproduce values as a painter reproduces them. He must instead, seek pleasing relations of light and shade and familiarize himself with those devices which will enable him to suggest color and present attractive relations of sunlight and shadow in his sketch.

An analysis of a simple sketch will serve to show some of these devices, and the manner in which they have been employed. Turning to the little note made at Ronda, one sees pencil drawing reduced almost to its lowest terms. We have the steep edge of the cliff, the hanging vines, the dark cedar, and the whitewashed houses, all suggested rather than drawn. The center of interest is in the center of the picture. Here a scrap or two of detail is shown. The garden wall stands up clearly, the masses of the foliage break into leaves, the windows show their iron balconies and the edge of the roof has a hint of tiling. But once we leave the center of the picture, we pass to broad masses of light and dark, which are placed one against the other, that an effective contrast and a pleasing pattern may result. Where it is required that the roofs be dark to emphasize the whitewashed house fronts, a few heavy strokes of the pencil have effected the purpose, but that the more distant house-tops may not disengage the eye from the center of interest, they are shown by lighter touches rapidly melting off into line and terminal spots. The same is true of the masses of foliage. Where they must be dark "to count", they have been drawn boldly, but where they must be light to tell against the gray cliffs,

they are suggested by a few serrate lines and smartly accented dots.

In the center of the sketch, the planes which go to make the forms constructive in character, have been carefully considered, and by use of outline leading away from mass, the eye has suggested to it these planes even where there is little but blank paper. Lastly there is to be noted the sparing use of deep black which has here and there been spotted in near some white, to give depth to a shadow and sparkle to the sketch as a whole. By one device and another, the eye is led into the picture and coaxed to the center of interest, where the old Spanish garden clings to the crag in a blaze of August sunshine.

This analysis will show in a measure how such a sketch is to be made. The subject once chosen one notes lightly upon the paper a few dots and a line or two to mark the proportions of the most salient forms. (Figure 5). One must then determine upon the contrasts which one will show, must determine, in other words, whether one will draw the tree as a light or a dark mass, whether window or door shall gape cavernously or shall exist merely as a few well drawn lines. The light and dark planes of the model will condition certain of these contrasts but it must be understood that for the most part, the translation and representation of these tones is a matter of choice— of nice appreciation of "effect."

The center of interest will of course be the point to which attention is chiefly to be directed. Some moments may be advantageously spent in simply studying the model with a view to its simplification, to determining just how few things may be put into the sketch without its becoming empty and uninteresting. For the most

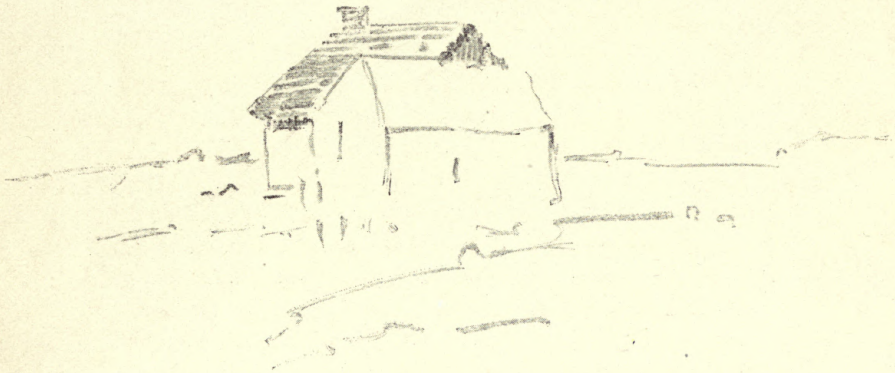


Fig. 5. Sketch started, outlines touched in and massing begun.

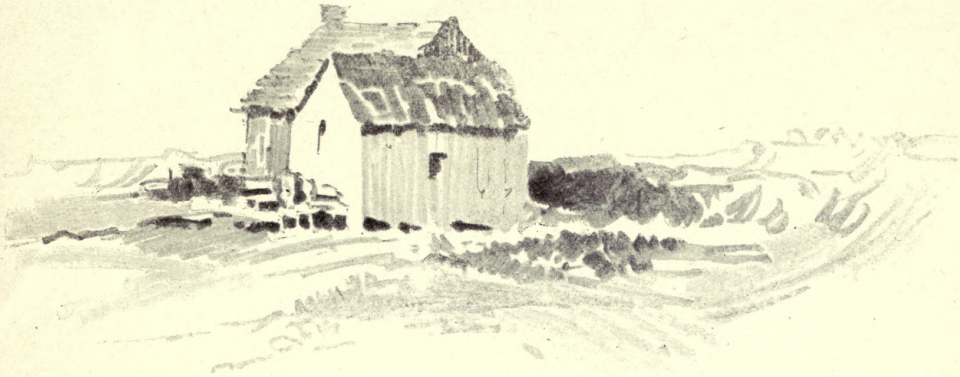


Fig. 6. Sketch finished in masses with sharp accents.

part the beginner will err in putting in too much rather than in leaving out too much.

Once the contrasts have been determined upon, and the forms "felt round" by the pencil tracing imaginary lines, the draftsman should proceed to block in the masses (Figure 6). So sure should he be of his drawing that it should be possible for him to begin above and work downward, changing his pencil from time to time as a harder or a softer lead is needed, but never remodeling any form or hatching one tone over another. Anything like the erasure of lines is, of course, not to be thought of. Light must be left out and darks must be put in of their full depth at the first drawing. From the center of interest, where are found the sharpest contrasts, he will proceed to the masses which lead out in grayer tones until they break into line and spot. This direct drawing will require the use of the intermediate and harder pencils. When it is finished, careful thought must be given to the placing of the deep blacks which lie in the softest lead. These should be added with a firm but sparing hand.

Such, in brief, is a description of the making of a sketch. To it may be added a few suggestions to guide the beginner. Texture should be sought in the pencil line. When one is drawing stone, one should think in terms of stone, and seek to have the pencil convey a sense of hardness and solidity (Figure 7). When one is drawing wood, one should think wood and feel the splintered roughness of the old plank or the gnarled and seamed surface of the tree trunk. Direction of the pencil stroke will help strengthen the structural idea. The upward stroke suggests growth and support, the horizontal stroke a flat plane as of the earth, or the even tiers of brick work or of stone. One should seek

with the pencil to model round each form, giving through the strokes the sense of direction which the form conveys (Figure 8). A broken bit of rock work, a group of bushes, or a group of out buildings will give capital practice in simplifying details and in modeling planes in three or four values.

If the student has access to reproductions of sketches such as have been named, he is urged to turn back to these repeatedly, that he may analyze them, and then betake himself to the field once more, to seek similar scenes for reproduction. A crooked street end, a window garden full of blossoms, a church tower or porch, or the trim doorway of a colonial mansion all offer excellent material. There is no town but presents countless "good subjects," and the student with eye a-search for the subtle beauty of contrasting light and shadow will have revealed to him the picturesque where it is quite hidden from his companions. Simple sketches should be at first attempted, bits of detail and uncomplicated masses. Only when these have been successfully rendered should there be an attempt to draw a prospect filled with brilliant lights and shadows. It is good practice at times to render the same scene in different ways, using one scheme of contrasts in the first drawing and a varying scheme in a second. This will reveal the range of such variations and will cause a realization of the fact that the successful pencil sketch is one dependent largely upon the taste of the draughtsman. Other things equal, he will make the best pencil sketch whose knowledge of design is best and who can as a pattern, weave together his blacks and whites most skilfully.

JAMES PARTON HANEY.

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(Manhattan and The Bronx.)

Fig. 7. Rock mass and grass; a simple subject for the beginner.

Fig. 8. Simple tree rendering, in three tones.

Fig. 9. Over grown garden—showing simplification of details.

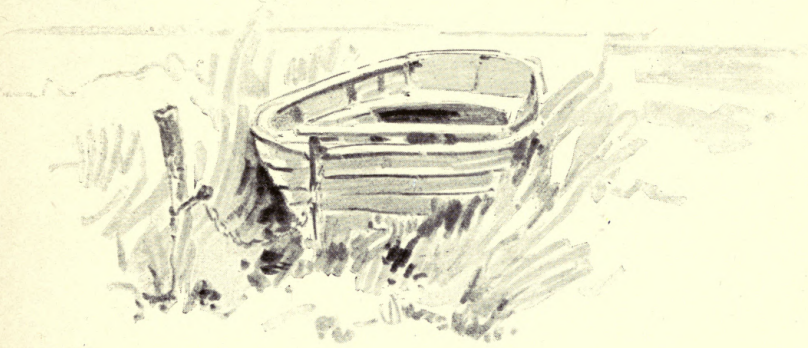

Fig. 10. Boat and beach grass—a contrast of textures.

Fig. 11. An Evergreen tree.

Fig. 12. An Old Doorway.